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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 CARACAS 000546

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SUBJECT: PRESS FREEDOM UPDATE - APRIL 2009

REF: A. CARACAS 539
¶B. CARACAS 378
¶C. CARACAS 099

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Classified By: A/POLITICAL COUNSELOR DANIEL LAWTON,
REASON 1.4 (D)

¶11. (C) Summary: The Government of the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela (GBRV) continued to put pressure on the independent media during April. President Chavez used the occasion of the anniversary of the April 2002 failed military coup to lambaste both the United States and opposition-oriented media, renewing his now routine threats to sanction networks that do not support him. Government supporters are focusing their complaints on independent cable news broadcaster Globovision. The Caracas chapter of the National Journalist Association is redoubling its efforts to defend press freedom. As Chavez radicalizes his Bolivarian revolution, the GBRV is likely to continue to threaten and sanction selected journalists and media outlets. Local pundits are split as to whether the GBRV will move to close Globovision. End Summary.

CHAVEZ URGES SANCTIONS FOR TV NETWORKS

¶12. (SBU) The GBRV marked the seventh anniversary of the failed 2002 military coup against Chavez April 11 by taking the opportunity to publicly blame the United States and opposition media for planning the coup. In his April 12 newspaper column, Chavez compared his return to power to the resurrection of Christ and wrote that the intellectual authors of the coup "who worked in harmony with officials of the U.S. Embassy" had not been brought to justice. The column also blamed opposition media for being an active part of the coup. A documentary about the day, broadcast on pro-government channels, claims that a phone call from then US Ambassador Shapiro to then Police Commissioner Lazaro Forero proves U.S. involvement in the coup. The documentary also accused the privately owned TV network Venevision of being part of the coup.

¶13. (SBU) On April 13, President Chavez publicly urged authorities to impose sanctions on Venezuelan television networks for allegedly backing the failed 2002 coup against him. Chavez has long accused Venevision, Globovision, RCTV and Televen of supporting the short-lived coup attempt by broadcasting cartoons and movies instead of the pro-Chavez street protests that aided his return to power. During a speech to his supporters in Caracas, Chavez said, "Nobody has touched them. Sanctions must be imposed."

¶ 4. (SBU) In reaction, Globovision legal consultant Ana Cristina Nunez told the local media, "The President is completely criminalizing the free exercise of freedom of expression." President of the National Journalist Association (CNP) William Echeverria replied to Chavez's threats during an April 15 radio program by saying, "It is evident that we are in an escalation, the Head of State (Chavez) is cornering us... The Government has mechanisms of indirect censorship and freedom of expression is strongly being threatened."

GLOBOVISION IN THE HOT SEAT

¶ 5. (SBU) During a March 31 hearing of the Permanent Committee on Science, Technology and Social Media in the National Assembly, pro-Chavez deputy Ricardo Capella proposed that an advisory referendum be held (in the undefined future) to determine the destiny of opposition oriented Globovision television. Criticizing the work of one Globovision journalist Beatriz Adrian, Capella said, "The conduct of this journalist is part of a destabilization plan directed by Globovision." On the same day the president of the committee, Manuel Villala, accused Globovision of "attacking the administration of Hugo Chavez." The GBRV has not yet announced any referendum on Globovision's future, however.

¶ 6. (SBU) The violent pro-Chavez group, "La Piedrita," published on its web-site a threat against Globovision by officially referring to the station and its sponsors as "military objectives" who have "betrayed the nation and are selling their soul to the devil and negotiating with Globovision." Among those specifically threatened by the

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April 22 posting was Leopoldo Castillo, anchor and host of the opposition-oriented Globovision interview program "Alo, Ciudadano" ("Hello Citizen").

GBRV CLAMPS DOWN ON "ONE OF THEIR OWN"

¶ 7. (C) Pro-government businessman Ramirez Saavedra, (owner of Radio Color 99.5 FM and Color TV), was arrested April 7 on corruption charges. Ramirez Saavedra is the founder and former National Vice-President of Telecommunications of the Socialist Confederation of Businessmen. The GBRV accuses him of misappropriating medical equipment allegedly belonging to Aragua State. The arrest of Saavedra, the former President of the Radio Chamber of Aragua, probably has more to do with his differences with new Aragua Governor Mario Isea and his rumored ties to former Aragua Governor Didalco Bolivar. Bolivar is a leader in the Podemos party, which fell out with Chavez in 2007.

CNP CALLS EMERGENCY SESSION

¶ 8. (SBU) The Caracas section of the National Journalist Association (CNP) held an emergency session April 23 to discuss the multitude of threats against democracy and freedom of expression in Venezuela. President of the CNP William Echeverria told the media, "Journalist aren't politicians, we don't belong to any party, and we are citizens with rights and duties. It is our duty to defend the values and principles of the democratic system, the freedom of expression, and the right to information before the attack of the Government to drain the spaces of dissidence." During the session, the assembly agreed to form a common front to address threats, participate in opposition-led demonstrations on May 1, and create an alliance between CNP and the pro-democracy student movement.

TEODORO PETKOFF UNDER FIRE

¶9. (C) The National Assembly (AN) opened a case April 27 to investigate Teodoro Petkoff, editor of the opposition daily Tal Cual (Ref A). PSUV AN Deputy Iris Varela accused Petkoff of committing fraud and document forgery by using his deceased mother's name to conduct commercial and real estate transactions. In addition the AN opened a second investigation against Petkoff on April 29 accusing him of violating national security by allegedly exchanging e-mails with the Colombian Defense Minister on the status of bilateral negotiations over the demarcation of territorial waters in the Venezuelan Gulf. Minister of Communication Blanca Eckhout announced the same day that Venezuela's Media should simply be "an instrument to gain understanding and deepen democracy" rather than "impeding true communication with the people." She suggested that Venezuela has suffered "excessive and irresponsible media power" and that the media should be "regulated by the people." (Ref A).

Comment

¶10. (C) President Chavez has been radicalizing his Bolivarian revolution since his February 15 referendum victory ending term limits, and the GBRV is likely to continue to threaten and sanction selected journalists and media outlets. Local pundits are split on whether the GBRV will move to close Globovision in the near term. The GBRV has the authority to do so and appears to be building its "legal" case against the station. However, the GBRV paid a political price domestically and internationally after it closed RCTV in 2007. Moreover, Globovision does not have anything close to the reach, audience, or influence that RCTV had, so the GBRV may find it more politically convenient to complain about -- but not to shutter -- the opposition cable news broadcaster. Another GBRV option would be to not renew Globovision's broadcasting license after it expires sometime around 2012.

CAULFIELD